

## [The Man Who Out Thought the Other Fellow]

THE MAN WHO OUT-THOUGHT THE OTHER FELLOW

A Depression Victim Story

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THE MAN WHO OUT-THOUGHT THE OTHER FELLOW

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"Yes I have made quite a good come-back." Paul Harrison said complacently. He glanced around with satisfaction at his almost new equipment and the recently installed neon lighting that conformed to the predominant black and white of the establishment.

"After you have heard the whole story," he went on, "I believe you will agree with me that I owe it entirely to my ability to out-think the other fellow."

The Star Dry Clean Plant, which Harrison owns and operates, is modern in every respect. Paul is an enormous person, weighing approximately 380 pounds. As I entered he was seated behind the 12 foot counter, upon which were placed a cash register and a bag used to tag garments as they were brought in.

Despite his mammoth size Harrison is always extremely neat and clean. On this morning he was wearing navy blue, pinstriped trousers, a brown sweater, and a brown checked cap. A stickpin, an elk's head studded with diamonds, [adorned?] his blue and brown-striped tie. He is about 5 feet 4 inches, his hair is snowy white, and his gray eyes are seen through rimmed glasses.

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"Shall I start at the beginning? he asked, "Or shall I just relate the trying personal experiences that plunged my business to rock bottom, and of how I re-instated myself absolutely on credit and the rest by honest dealing with the people of Augusta?"

"Please let me have the whole story." I answered quickly. "Right from the day of your birth."

"Well, I was borne in Graniteville, South Carolina, January 22, 1822. I was the only boy and I had two sisters. By the way, my only living sister has been employed as a switchboard operator at the University Hospital since its completion in 1916.

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"I attended grammar school at [Vaucluse?] and Langly, South Carolina, and finished the fifth grade when I was twelve years old. Then my parents moved to Augusta and I started to work in the weaving room at the Enterprise Cotton Mill and worked there for two years.

"About this time a cousin of mine who was foreman of the machine shop at the Augusta Mill, offered me an apprenticeship, which I completed in three years. All during that time I was attending night school conducted by Professor Otis, who afterwards became principal of John Milledge School.

"With the machinist's trade at my finger ends I felt capable of supporting a wife and I married Eva Madrin on December 14, 1902.

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We furnished our home comfortably and settled down contentedly to be just good citizens of Augusta.

"Our plans were soon upset for a friend of mine who had gone to Atlanta to work in the railroad machine shops, wrote me that they were in need of machinists and that he had given my name and address to the master-mechanic. I hadn't considered making a change but finally after receiving an offer with quite an increase in salary I said to my wife:

"Do you want to move to Atlanta?"

"Yes,' she said, 'If you do.'

"That very day I had my furniture crated and left to report for work at the Atlanta shops.

"Everything went along fine for 14 months and then I was laid up for several weeks with a badly mashed foot. As soon as I was able to get about, my wife and I decided to come home.

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"Her mother and mine insisted that we stay in Augusta, so as soon as I could walk real well I went to work for the Atlantic Ice and Coal Company. After some time I received such a good offer from the Lombard Machine Shops, that I left and went there to work. I was also employed for at short time at the Georgia Iron Works. My last work as a machinist was helping with the installation of machinery at the Atlantic Ice and Coal Company's plant on Fenwick Street.

"There were two reasons why I gave up working at my trade.

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First, business was not so good and second, I had developed gland trouble that was causing me to put on weight very rapidly. At that time I weighed 230 pounds and was getting too heavy on my feet to follow my regular occupation.

"Now I was confronted with the problem of finding a new way to make a living." Paul continued. "While I was in Atlanta I met two young men who lived near me. These boys had no trade and very little capital. They had conceived the idea of washing overalls at their home and, in about a year they were operating a full-fledged laundry which kept four trucks busy. I just thought to myself, if they could be that successful in Atlanta, why couldn't I do as well in Augusta.

"I had a long talk with my wife about it and she said that she would be glad to help me. At that time we had a very small back yard. Then came the problem of equipment. I bought two large washpots and several syrup barrels. I sawed the latter in halves to use for tubs. Next I hired two colored women and after I had purchased a two wheeled hand cart I was ready to get out and solicit some business.

"My first work was obtained from the railroad and machine shops. I called for and delivered the overalls each week for 50 cents a pair.

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"In a few months my customers began to suggest that I expand my business and start doing their suits as well. One fellow 5 brought me a dirty, greasy coat and said '[Fatty?]', take this coat that I have been using for a sweater; wash the devil out of it and it comes clean anything will and you won't have to worry about hurting the fellows' suits.

"I decided to try it and carried the coat to my wife. She [sewed?] just half of it in a heavy cloth sack. I washed and pressed the other half with startling results. It looked as good as new. Then I decided to use this coat as an advertisement. I was immediately accused by several people of taking an old and new coat and sewing the halves together.

"I soon found that cleaning suits was more than I had bargained for, but as the men all agreed not to hold me responsible for fading or shrinkage, I said I would try. So, with a scrub brush and soap I cleaned my first suit. We wrung the garments out by hand and pressed them with a 22-pound hand iron that was heated on a gas stove. Scrubbing suits was much cleaner work than washing overalls and it was much more profitable for I received \$1.25 per suit.

"I soon discarded the push cart and bought/ a bicycle. Work kept on coming in and soon it was too much for the bicycle. My business was going beyond my wildest expectations. Soon it was too much to be conducted at my home so I rented a store, at the rear of the [Malton?] Way Drug Company, that was fronted on Young street and opened a first-class pressing club. I contracted with the Holley Wagon works to build me a truck to cost 6 \$185.00 and say! When that truck was finished with its glass doors and Harrison Pressing Club painted on its sides I began to feel like a real business man.

"I moved my residence to Walton Way next door to a vacant lot. The owner agreed to give me five years rent in exchange for my building a place large enough to house my pressing club. I bought the lumber and erected a place 22 x 40 feet. Then I kept adding to it until it reached the fence. Business was booming, but just about this time the War Department was beginning to draft married men and my pressers were expecting to be called.

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"Camp Hancock had been established about five miles from the city and the soldiers had now way to get back and forth. Expecting my pressers to be taken from me, I decided that maybe I could make more money operating [jitney?] to and from Camp Hancock, then I could with my pressing club, especially if my helpers were drafted.

"A friend of mine was anxious to buy the business, and with the proviso that I wouldn't open another pressing club within a year, I sold it to him.

"I purchased a seven-passenger red car and took out a license to haul soldiers to and from the city. For a little better than six months I mad more money than I could ever have expected at the pressing club. That field soon got overcrowded, 7 however, and nobody made anything.

"When the year was up I opened another pressing club at Sandy Beaver's corner and from there I moved to D'Antignae Street. It was then I began to use mineral spirits for cleaning and I bought a gas presser. Business was good and my friends urged me to move downtown into a larger place. So I rented the storehouse at 7th and Ellis Streets and stayed there for four years. Then my lease expired and the place was sold to the Gulf Refining Company.

"Rents were very high at this time and I found a place to suit me at 7th and Fenwick Streets I had to pay \$60 rent. I bought quite a bit of equipment, did a lot of repairing and moved in. I was operating three trucks and had two bicycle boys. Prices remained about the same, \$1.25 and up, and I was averaging \$600 a week with a net profit of \$100. All of my equipment was paid for and now I could plan to do some of the things I had always wanted to do. Mainly, to build a home where and how I wanted it. I bought a lot on [?] road and built a 6-room bungalow that cost \$3,500. My wife had never been so happy and she spent most of her time in her flower garden. It seemed to me that she was always planting bulbs. Then one night I went home and found her crying. She finally told me that the ants had raided her garden, and had eaten all of her bulbs 8 leaving only the husks.

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“It's no use Paul, I must go to a florist and find out what to do about it, there must be some way.’ So the next day we went on the war-path against the ants. “Another of the things I wanted to do was have a nice car for our own use. I bought a 5-passenger Buick and after I had done these two things I still had enough to do the third thing, which was to have a nice bank account.

“One day a drummer for a Dry Cleaning Supply Company came into my place and seeing the volume of business I had he offered me \$100 a month rent if I would let him have the place. I agreed, never dreaming that he was in earnest. But he came back on the first of the month and insisted that I stick to my word.

“I really didn't mind so very much I was anxious to take a rest and was glad for the opportunity.

“Everything went well for several months, then I learned that the man was behind with his rent and he had a great many unpaid bills. This worked a hardship on me for everything was still in my name. I asked him some questions and he admitted that he was unable to make a go of the business and asked me to relieve him of it.

“There was nothing else for me to do as I had no contract and he had nothing with which to pay. So I took it over with an indebtedness of several hundred dollars. Bright and early the next morning I was on the job and before very long I had paid the bills and began to make money.

“Everybody will tell you that competition is the life of business. I didn't find it so for soon another dry cleaning firm opened a cash and carry business close to me, cutting prices in half. I soon realized I couldn't stay at that location and in order to meet their competition I moved on the 800 Block of Broad Street, sold two of my trucks and operated a cash and carry business. I paid \$125 a month rent. This increased my overhead and decreased my income. I had a business from \$300 to \$400 a week with only a \$50 profit.

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"This price cutting hurt business considerably and everybody began to talk "depression." I was satisfied and felt that I was still getting my share.

"One Friday morning in 1931, I went down and opened up as usual. There seemed to be something wrong but I didn't figure it out until I happened to notice the clothes racks. Every garment that was ready for Saturday delivery was gone. I hurriedly looked in the cases; they were also empty. The open window at the rear of the store told the grim story.

"I called the police department out but no trace of the burglars was ever found. The missing garments amounted to 10 more than \$1,000 and I didn't have a penny's worth of burglar insurance.

"I notified my customers through the newspapers that I would reimburse them for all stolen articles. This must be done from my own funds but I couldn't do anything else.

"I thought I knew people but I found out I had a lot to learn. Some were reasonable and considerate. They realized that they should only expect me to pay for worn articles. Others demanded new prices and even more. What could I do? I had said I would pay.

"Then I had to resort to my bank account. I drew everything I had out of the bank and started to pay up. I soon found that I had more claims than cash. I paid as best I could and the funny thing to me was that many of the customers whom I was unable to pay immediately carried their work to other places. I guess there's a lot of truth in the saying: 'When a fellow's down, keep knocking.'

"By this time the depression was on in full swing. There was no way to borrow money for many of the banks were closing. I soon realized that I had made the serious mistake of turning loose all of my cash and now there was nothing left for operating expenses. I couldn't pay my rent and I had to release the greater part of my help. My wife offered to come down and fill in one of the vacancies.



"Then things happened in rapid succession. First our home went. Then I laid the truck aside and used my personal car.

"Did you sell your truck?" I interrupted.

"Sell it," he said contemptuously. "Who do you think would buy a truck? I couldn't even give it away. I was now down to my last dollar and had decided to close up, when one of the ladies who was working for me asked me to allow her and her father to operate the place."

At this point I stopped him again: "But, Mr. Harrison, if you couldn't make a go of it with all your experience, how in the world could she expect to even clear expenses?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Unless it was that they weren't in debt and had a little money besides. Then you know, too, I have lived long enough to know that the other fellow always thinks he can handle your problems better than you can, if he was just given a chance. So I agreed. They were to pay me \$35 a month for the use of the equipment.

"In the meantime I sold my automobile for what I could get and signed over my equipment to the real estate agent as security for the rent. The woman and her father paid me for the use of the equipment for about five months and I thought they were paying the rent. When I learned that it wasn't being paid I felt that this was the last straw.

"I went to the real estate agent and explained the whole situation to him. Of course he knew all about it beforehand and he said to me: 'Paul, these are hazardous times. We are all wondering what another week or month will bring forth. You always paid when you had it and my advice to you is to go and take your old place over and run it yourself. Start now and pay your rent by the week and don't worry about the back rent until your business picks up.'

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“Very much encouraged over his attitude I said:

“Thank you, I'll follow your advice immediately and try once more. This time I'll operate strictly on a cash and carry basis and pay as I go. If I don't have the cash on hand to buy cleaning fluid, I just won't buy it.’

“I got busy and to obtain the cash necessary to begin again, I sold my \$300 diamond ring for \$100, and my banjo that cost me \$150 for \$50. Then I opened for business and solicited customers. I offered to do work for prices that would scarcely enable me to meet expenses, in order to get some business.

“Here I had struck another snag. You see, I still owed some money on the stolen clothing and everybody thought that because I had re-opened I now had sufficient money to pay for the rest of them. In reality I was sinking deeper in debt. Before long my nerves were shot to pieces with the strenuous effort I had made to hold on to my business until the economic crisis was over. Finally, one morning in the latter part of 1931, I walked into the real estate office and threw 13 the keys on the counter. I was through. My last dollar was gone.

“The real estate man just asked if I would run the place until he could get a sale for the equipment. He said that I might have whatever I could take in.

“That was not much of an offer, for the dry cleaning business was as dead as Hector. Everybody had long ago come the conclusion that they could wear dirty clothes, but it wasn't a bit pleasant to go hungry. Even the people who could afford to have work done were scared to death to part with a dollar.

“Early in 1932, my friend, the real estate man, sold the equipment to a man at Thompson, Georgia for \$1,100. And so I had to stand there and see the things that I had worked so hard for moved out of my place - and to Thomson.

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"My wife and I moved into the house with her mother and her brother and I began to look around for some way to bear our part of the expenses. In February 1933, I located an old empty store on 12th street that I could rent almost at my own figure. I wrote to the man in Thomson and asked him if he would sell me one of my boilers and a presser on credit. He shipped it to me immediately and my wife and I worked together and made another start - buying and paying by the week.

"Just as I was clearing a little more than bare expenses, 14 a man who was out of work came to me and asked me that I let him work for me; that he would be glad for just what I could pay him. That he would be only too glad for the chance to make a dollar. I hired him and gave him the press to operate.

"Now let me put you wise to something. If anybody offers to do anything for you for nothing - that's just what it's worth. In a short time my protege had offered the man at Thomson slightly more than I was paying on the boiler and press and he let him have it.

"Well it ended as things like that usually end. Before very long the place was closed and the man left for parts unknown.

"I had really hit bottom this time. I was out of work, no business and no money. But we had to eat and this was certainly no time to hold one's hands and await a miracle. I was sure there must be some business that I could get and I determined to make one more attempt to get a foot-hold.

"I rented the store on the corner of Walton Way and Young street, bought a boiler and an extractor from a friend of mine and opened for business. My wife and I lived in the room at the rear of the store and worked early to late. She mended and altered garments and after a time we were breaking even. And we were so thankful to have a place to live and to be able to eat.

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"In those trying days I never advanced a great deal without a set-back. This time the store was sold and I had to find another location. Fortune smiled on me a little this time, for I was able to get the place I had operated my first plant. I moved in and built a small place in the yard. I had no equipment to take care of dry cleaning so I sent all of my work to another plant and we did the pressing.

"I only had one presser then but before I left that location I had three pressers and had saved enough to make a down payment on a small dry cleaning plant.

"Then I decided to plunge in and take a big chance on a come-back. It was an awful risk in the face of what had gone before but this place which I now occupy was vacant and I rented it and moved in.

"I still had a lot of faith in the people of Augusta and believed that if I tried hard enough I could get their business. I had always done my best to warrant their good will. I had refused to go into bankruptcy and had paid my debts even though it had taken everything in the world I had.

"The venture proved successful and after two years I had paid for my equipment. A small plant offered me a good price for it and as I again felt the urge to expand I let them have it.

"I bought the very latest and most highly improved 16 machines and now I have one of the best equipped plants in the city. I run four pressers and use a steam iron for ladies' work.

"If I am spared a few more months I will have paid for my equipment which is valued at \$5,000. I now employ eight people with an average payroll of \$100 a week. Some of them work on a commission basis.

"It's been a tough uphill fight and I've had lots of people to do everything in their power to deprive me of my business, my credit, and even my self respect. I can truthfully say,

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however, that nobody battled to give me the opportunity to regain what I had lost. And I repeat I have what I have solely because of my ability to out-think the other fellow.”

Harrison attends all of the Baptist Churches. He sings tenor and helps in the choir where he is most needed. He picks a banjo and is greatly interested in everything musical.

As an afterthought he said jokingly:

“And now I'll tell you why I never joined any of the Baptist churches. My size is too great for their baptizing equipment.”